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ABSTRACT

During the past 10 years, a Japanese instructor at an American university has learned to use her cultural background to her advantage. As a graduate student at Bowling Green State University (Ohio), she first perceived her background as an obstacle to her teaching and tried to pretend that she was not different from other faculty. But this mindset did not change students' perceptions of her, nor did it help their learning. Thus, she began to consider her role at a predominantly white university where the majority of students in her weekly group discussion were from small rural towns in Ohio. Moveover, the faculty was also predominantly white. She decided that her role was to increase students' awareness of their own and others' cultures. Additionally, she learned that some students, through their interactions with a Japanese teacher, will begin to lose their fear of the unknown. They will, with time, learn to accept a foreign accent and to understand it. Most importantly, they will learn that there is much to be learned from one who is of a different culture. In her communication classes, this instructor uses cultural comparisons between Japan and the United States to spark discussions about a range of issues from marriage and gender roles to Japanese stereotypes of Americans. (TB)

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Perspectives in Teaching: Submerged Voices in the Classroom
A Japanese in America: What Can She Do?

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"Perspectives in Teaching: Submerged Voices in the Classroom" -- given this topic, my initial reaction was to discuss the problems I, as a female Japanese instructor, have experienced at a predominantly white university. Like others who do not fit the traditional image of a university professor, I have experienced my share of problems stemming from sexism and racism and have been made uncomfortable, frustrated, and depressed. No matter what I do, there are always students who complain about my accent, who cannot accept nor take seriously a female instructor, and who must remind me of the Japanese sneak attack on the Pearl Harbor in December. It is easy to talk about these students.

On the second thought, however, I realized that the discussion of such students would not represent my teaching experience for the past ten years because I had in most part enjoyed teaching. I also began to think of the positive effects of my Japanese background on my relationship with students that outweighed my problems. Thus, the further consideration of the topic made me think that the "submerged voices in the classroom" meant the role of an instructor who did not share the common background with students in enriching their learning experience. It is in this sense that I will discuss my experience in this paper.

In retrospect, my role as a Japanese instructor at an American university was defined when I started teaching as a graduate assistant at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. The first teaching assignment I got was to lead a discussion group once a week for a professor who taught an introductory Sociology course with over two hundred students. Well aware of the fear I was feeling prior to the first discussion session, Dr. Eldon Snyder told me that a majority of students in my group were from small rural towns in Ohio and therefore had probably never seen, let alone met, a Japanese in real life before. He encouraged me by saying that my presence in the classroom alone was a learning experience to students and even my accent was good for them. Although I

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did not think much about his words back then, the years of teaching experience has made me realize that not only was he right but my background is my strength. During the past ten years, I have learned to use my background to my advantage and thus to make my voice clearly heard in the classroom.

My Japanese background is an undeniable factor in my teaching which has to be dealt with by both students and myself. To many students, having a Japanese instructor makes their experience in the classroom different from their previous experience with other courses. Understandably, they are uncertain, worried, and even fearful at first. Facing these students, I must make them realize that a Japanese instructor can not only be as effective as others in teaching but also offer them a unique learning opportunity. The first obstacle we must overcome is my accent. Knowing some students will experience difficulties with my accent which is a main reason for students' uncertainty about a non-American instructor, I tell them in the first class that, if they do not understand me, they can stop me anytime because it is important to me that they understand my lecture. There are usually a few brave souls who actually stop me and I willingly comply with their request by repeating my sentences. This makes other students begin to feel comfortable in my class. Additionally, they get used to my accent in a few weeks. As Dr. Snyder told me years ago, this is already a learning experience to students, for they tend to think that they speak standard English and therefore everyone must speak like them. While English has become an universal language due to the powerful position the United States has maintained in the world politically and culturally since the end of WW II, it is not spoken in the same way everywhere.[1] When technological developments have made frequent international contacts possible, students are more likely than not to meet non-native English speakers in their lifetime. It benefits students to know that everyone does not speak English as they do and also that they can understand non-native speakers.

When they overcome the initial uncertainty, some students begin to show an interest in Japan. There are always students who know someone in Japan or from Japan because of the close

relationship between the United States and Japan and they begin to tell me about their Japanese connections. Other students take a Japanese language course or know some Japanese words and begin to test their Japanese language skills with me. More importantly, they begin to ask questions about Japan in class. These questions vary widely, from "Do you know someone in Kobe?" (after the earthquake hit the city) to "Do you like Akira Kurosawa?" and "Do the Japanese write from left to right, or right to left?" Again, a few brave souls decide to ask questions initially. In many cases, such questioning soon becomes an integral part of the class. Over the years, I have found out that many students are curious about Japan and do not mind hearing about it. Since the media coverage of Japan is limited both in terms of the number and content, to hear and see about aspects of Japan they are not familiar with certainly get their attention.[2] Thus, I have learned to use my background to get students' attention and to teach them.

Since the United States and Japan contrast each other in many dimensions of cultural variability, such as individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance,[3] the Japanese culture provides excellent examples to make students think about their own culture. For instance, in Popular Culture and the Mass Media, I discuss the importance of the extended family, including the purpose of and rationale for arranged marriages, in traditional Japanese society to make students think of their own value placed in the nuclear family and marriage. Since students cannot accept the idea of arranged marriages, this discussion frequently extends to the discussion of the role of husband and wife in the Japanese family and furthermore that of men and women in Japanese society. This topic has never failed to get students' attention. The Japanese magazines I use in the discussion of stereotypes always get their attention as well. It does not take them long to realize that Japanese magazines are "backward." When they say so, I tell them that they are backward to the Japanese. In this course and also in Cross-Cultural Communication, I show the Japanese flag and ask students what the red circle symbolize. It is the sun and the sun is red in Japan as opposed to yellow or orange in the United States. This short demonstration introduces students to differences in perceptions among cultures. In International Media Systems, students

watch Japanese TV commercials. They are amused by a large number of image commercials, the frequent use of Caucasians, and many American products and corporations advertised in Japan. This exercise provides an opportunity to discuss a different view of commercials that reflects cultural values and also the concept of cultural imperialism. Beside illustrating the theories and concepts in textbooks, the use of Japan and its cultural products as examples has two merits. First, it increases students' awareness that others do not always think, act, or do things as they do. Secondly, it makes my voice not only audible but authentic.

Another way I use Japan in my courses is to discuss topics which tend to make students uncomfortable. In Popular Culture and the Mass Media, I have students think about the stereotype of Americans in Japan, using Japanese magazines, television commercials, and print advertisements. It does not take long for students to realize the Japanese love of tall, skinny, blue-eyed, and blonde-haired Americans. Their views are confirmed by the testimonial by several Americans living in Japan which I have on the videotape. Many students who do not fit the stereotype are made uncomfortable. Even those who conform to the stereotype often argue against the Japanese view. For one class period, most students confront the stereotype which they were not aware of and learn about the effect of stereotyping. The effectiveness of this exercise has been attested to by students' comments on the course evaluations and in person which indicate that the experience in this class stays with them for a long time. In Cross-Cultural Communication, I used Japan as the setting to discuss racism. In the age of political correctness, students become quiet every time racism is brought up in class because they are uncomfortable with the topic and also afraid of saying something wrong or offensive. I invited to my class an African American faculty who produced a documentary on racism against blacks in Japan. Although some students remained quiet, others were curious and a few were angered by the way African Americans were stereotyped and discriminated against in Japan. Apparently, students were less comfortable to discuss racism on this occasion even though the presentation focused on the influence of the Western ideology on the Japanese perception of African Americans because they were positioned

as observers of others' problem. This approach may not be the best way to have students think about the problems that exist in their own country, but it has a potential to initiate a discussion on these problems.

During the past ten years, I learned to use my Japanese background to my advantage and thus to make my voice authentic in the classroom. It is true that I perceived my background as an obstacle to my teaching at first and tried to pretend that I was not different from other faculty. But it did not change students' perception of me (I cannot change the way I look) nor helped their learning. Thus, I began to consider that my role at a predominantly white university with the predominantly white faculty was to increase students' awareness of their own and others' cultures. Additionally, I learned that, through interactions with me, some students begin to lose their fear of unknown others. As a staff member who regularly worked with students told me, many students were afraid of me at first but, after spending time in my classes, they began to think I was good. I would be most successful if I could open the door to intercultural and international experiences, even slightly, for students.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Braj B. Kachru, ed., *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982) for the spread of English as an universal language in the world.

[2] According to the study of United States television coverages of foreign affairs by Professor Hiroshi Houdo of Tokyo University, between September 1992 and May 1993, United States television gave a mere three hours and 13 minutes to the coverage of Japan, only 3% of the total hours spent on foreign affairs. Moreover, the coverage centered on Japan's international relations, politics, and economy. ("Terebi Ga Umu Rikai To Gokai (Understanding and Misunderstanding Created by Television)" *Asahi Shimbun* (6/21/94): 21.)

[3] William B. Gudykunst and Tsukasa Nishida, *Bridging Japanese/North American Differences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 19-36.